

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

HELICOPTER ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION

MH-53M, S/N 70-1625

9MI EAST OF BAGRAM, AFGHANISTAN

23 NOVEMBER 2003

On 23 November 2003, at 1227 GMT (1657L), an MH-53M helicopter, serial number 70-1625, Call Sign Beatle 12, assigned to the 20th Special Operations Squadron, 16th Special Operations Wing, Hurlburt Field, Florida, crashed adjacent to a river in high mountainous terrain 9 miles East of Bagram, Afghanistan. The helicopter was destroyed. Four of six aircrew and one US Army passenger died in the accident. The remaining two aircrew and six passengers sustained injuries ranging from minor to severe.

The mishap aircraft (MA) was number two of a two-ship formation conducting Infiltration/Exfiltration operations supporting the Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF). The formation was on their third round-robin sortie of the day, climbing to clear mountainous terrain, when the mishap sequence occurred.

Approximately five minutes after takeoff from Bagram, Beatle 12 experienced a compressor stall in the number two engine causing engine failure. Reversing course, the mishap aircrew (MC) attempted to jettison the auxiliary fuel tanks without success. Dumping fuel to reduce weight and unable to maintain single engine flight, the MC set up for a precautionary landing. During the landing phase, at 150-200 feet AGL, the remaining engine lost power and the helicopter landed fast on a level, rocky river bank, subsequently ran into a 3-foot-high embankment that severed the tail boom, rolled left and came to rest inverted. A post-crash fire rapidly consumed the aircraft.

Beatle 11 landed adjacent to the crash site within three minutes and provided immediate recovery and security efforts. All injured aircrew and passengers were recovered and immediately transported to Bagram airfield.

By clear and convincing evidence, the Board President determined the causes of this mishap were failure of the number two engine due to compressor stall, failure of the auxiliary fuel tanks to jettison, and the uneven terrain of the landing area. Contributing factors include the subsequent failure of the number one engine when the demands of the high altitude and high gross weight caused an over-temperature and compressor stall; and insufficient written guidance on checking the auxiliary fuel tank jettison system.

Under 10 U.S.C. 2254(d) any opinion of the accident investigators as to the cause of or the factors contributing to, the accident set forth in the accident investigation report may not be considered as evidence in any civil or criminal proceeding arising from an aircraft accident, nor may such information be considered an admission of liability of the United States or by any person referred to in conclusions or statements.